

WHERE HANNAH ARENDT WENT WRONG

By [Shlomo Avineri](#) - [Israel books2010](#)

Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism remains innovative and brilliant, though she failed abysmally to understand modern anti-Semitism.

The *Origins of Totalitarianism*, by Hannah Arendt, newly published in Hebrew as "Yesodot Hatotalitariut," translated from the English by Idith Zertal; Hakibbutz Hameuchad Publishing House, 742 pages, NIS 118

In English, "The Origins of Totalitarianism" is available in hardcover from Schocken, with an introduction by Samantha Power, 704 pages, \$37.50; in paperback from Mariner Books, 576 pages, \$19.

Hannah Arendt's "The Origins of Totalitarianism," first published in 1951 (in English), has played a major role in shaping the way international affairs have been viewed, from the second half of the 20th century onward. Perhaps more than any other treatise, it has contributed to the way people with a liberal outlook have grappled with the totalitarian ideas and regimes of both the right and the left. To a large extent, this book entrenched the concept of totalitarianism and characterized this type of regime, stressing the shared characteristics of Nazism and Communism, despite the many differences between them.

The publication of the first Hebrew translation of this work, which entailed considerable effort because of Arendt's complex and sometimes unsystematic mode of writing, is an important and welcome event. It is sometimes said that the reason the book was never translated earlier was because of the anger in Israel over her theory about the "banality of evil," as expressed in her book "Eichmann in Jerusalem" (1963).

Yet other books about totalitarianism also took a long time to come out in Hebrew: Karl Popper's "The Open Society and its Enemies," which was first published in 1945, was only translated into Hebrew in 2003; F.A. Hayek's "The Road to Serfdom" (1944) came out in Hebrew only in 1998; and "Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy," by Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski (1956), has not yet been accorded a Hebrew translation. For understandable reasons, "The Origins of Totalitarian Democracy," by Jacob Talmon, then a professor of modern history at Hebrew University, came out in Hebrew shortly after the 1952 publication of the English edition.

This hasn't been some kind of evil conspiracy. Rather, there are objective difficulties with the translation of many important theoretical books, and the need is less than urgent because intellectual and academic circles in Israel, after all, have access to them in English. The absence of a Hebrew edition has not prevented lecturers at the country's universities from including Arendt's book on reading lists for students since the mid-1950s. Nevertheless, it will come as no surprise if the appearance of the Hebrew translation makes waves in the public discourse.

It is difficult to classify Arendt's volume on totalitarianism as a book on philosophy, history, political science or mass psychology. In fact, it is a treatise about the history of culture that is tremendous in its scope, and in this respect it is in the tradition of all-embracing works like Oswald Spengler's "The Decline of the West" or Arnold Toynbee's "A Study of History." Nevertheless, despite its eclectic character (or "hybrid" nature, as Idith Zertal, the translator and editor of the Hebrew edition, calls it in her preface), to this day it offers the best insight into totalitarian movements and regimes.

After World War II, the West faced an intricate problem: While Nazism and Fascism had been defeated, this victory was made possible largely thanks to Stalin's Soviet Union. Before 1945, the war could be depicted as pitting the "free world" against the dictatorships of Hitler and Mussolini, but the strong-armed Communist takeover of Eastern Europe made it difficult to cling to this fiction.

Hannah Arendt -- like Popper and Talmon -- afforded the West the ideological infrastructure needed to see the Cold War not only as a struggle between two superpowers aspiring to world hegemony, but also as a continuation of the fight against totalitarianism as such, whether it comes from the right or the left. Arendt made a crucial contribution to that fight, and therefore her book -- which does not make for easy reading -- won tremendous popularity not only in academia but also among the general public. As happens in such cases, it is not entirely clear

that everyone who cites the book has actually read it or thoroughly understood it (much as with Francis Fukuyama's "The End of History and the Last Man" and Samuel Huntington's "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order").

Arendt's primary contribution to the understanding of totalitarianism lies mainly in her contention that the totalitarian movements, both fascist and communist, provided an answer to the masses facing the disintegration of traditional European society, with its hierarchies, norms and accepted modes of behavior. Modernization and democratization, it emerges, did not in fact elevate "the people" but often, rather, the "masses" or the "mob" ? an observation already made by conservative writers like Jose Ortega y Gasset.

According to this perspective, fascism and communism were not a continuation of the historical dictatorships based on ruling classes or conquests. They represented a new kind of tyranny, nourished by the alienation spread by modern life. The individual, "the common man," is entirely cut off from moderating or restraining affiliations. He has nothing in his life but the idea that connects him directly, with no need of institutional mediation, to the movement and the leader.

Hence the mass marches and pageants -- whether in Nuremburg or in Red Square. Hence the intoxication from the stunning individual experience of marching together with tens of thousands of others to stirring music and flags waving. Hence, too, the creation of an intrusive bureaucratic machine, accompanied by a secret police force and concentration camps, with hierarchical and rigid discipline binding together a population with no other foci of identification. What enthusiastic belief does not do, fear will, and the combination of the two is tremendously powerful.

The cruel irony is that the totalitarian society really is a classless society that could therefore be headed by nonentities like Hitler and Stalin, who truly did represent the "people's will," as embodied in an indistinguishable mass, far more than their sophisticated and educated rivals. These leaders demanded total conformism in every aspect of life, from thought to dress, and therefore they excluded, and destroyed, minority groups. Blind loyalty to the populist leader also led to belief in his supernatural powers, and the absence of an effective opposition to his rule, even when the extent of his failure should have been clear to all.

Nazism and nationalism

Today we know far more about totalitarian regimes than Arendt did when she wrote the book. Thousands of studies have opened the Nazi regime's secrets to us, and many facts about the Soviet Union came to light (or were finally confirmed) after its disintegration. Nevertheless, Arendt's descriptions are still read with great excitement, just as Arthur Koestler's novel "Darkness at Noon" still provides insight into the purge trials in Moscow, perhaps more than many learned treatises.

However, most of Arendt's book does not actually discuss totalitarianism. Of its three sections, only the last focuses on totalitarianism; the first two are entitled "Antisemitism" and "Imperialism." While the fact that Arendt was not a historian did not impair her analysis of contemporary totalitarian regimes, it did lead her to develop some problematic conclusions in the first two parts of the book, in which she discusses political developments in Europe in the modern period, mainly the emergence of racism and what she calls "the decline of the nation-state." The justified excitement over Arendt's profound insights into totalitarianism in the final section of the book are to a large extent responsible for the lack of attention paid to the other parts of the tome.

In the section on imperialism, Arendt devotes a chapter to the rise of the pan-German and pan-Slavic movements and, surprisingly, depicts them as evidence of the decline of the nation-state. However, historical research, like the statements of those selfsame "pan-" movements, indicates that they are clearly nationalist movements taken to the extreme. For instance, pan-Slavism was an expansion of Russian nationalism, aided by the national movements of other Slavic peoples (such as the Czechs, but never the Poles). And German nationalism at its most extreme was not satisfied with the unification of Germany. The pan-German ideology saw itself as the clearest expression of German nationalism, and therefore saw the Volksdeutsche -- ethnic Germans living in other Eastern Europe countries -- as an integral part of the German people and the Third Reich.

To argue otherwise means overlooking and missing the historic connection between Nazism and its roots in the extreme wing of German nationalism. Associating the "pan-" movements with the decline of the nation-state also brings Arendt to her problematic placement of modern anti-Semitism in the fabric of European history.

Her key statement on this issue, which pervades her entire discussion of anti-Semitism, is that "modern anti-Semitism grew in proportion as traditional nationalism declined, and reached its climax at the exact moment when the European system of nation-states and its precarious balance of powers crashed."

There is no historical support for this contention, and research shows that the opposite is true: It was the rise of the modern nation-state, and the challenges it faced, that led to the sharp increase in anti-Semitism. As Zeev Sternhell has shown, the rise of integral nationalism at the end of the 19th century in France was channeled in the Dreyfus affair into extreme anti-Semitism, and studies by George Mosse and Peter Pulzer indicate a similar link in Germany and Austria.

Moreover, and this is totally missing from Arendt's account, the rise of aggressive anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe is directly connected to the rise of nationalist movements and nation-states there. As nationalism thrived and achieved its political aims in Romania, Hungary, Poland and Lithuania, anti-Semitism increased when the nationalist movements had to confront the existence of a relatively large Jewish minority in their territories. Apart from a discussion of Russia, where Arendt's analyses are riddled with her problematic view of pan-Slavism as an expression of the failure of Russian nationalism, Eastern Europe is absent from Arendt's discussion. This raises the following very big question: How is it possible to discuss modern anti-Semitism while ignoring what happened to the most sizable Jewish population, which was in Eastern Europe?

A more comprehensive examination of Arendt's theory concerning the rise of anti-Semitism in the parts of Europe she does discuss (mostly Germany and to a certain extent France) confronts the reader with yet another problematic conclusion: that the Jews, through their financial and banking activities, played a crucial role in the rise of the absolute monarchies and the modern nation-state. Critical readers cannot help but ask themselves what exactly is going on here, and where these views are coming from.

The answer is clear: Arendt, who explicitly acknowledges that she is not a historian, is talking about the role played by the "court Jews," mainly in the 18th century, in the courts of some German princes. At the same time, she is basing her argument on Jewish bankers' involvement in the development of the banking system in the 19th century. No one disputes this. The problem is that Arendt generalizes from these historical findings to draw conclusions about the place of "the Jews" in European history, while entirely ignoring the fact that most of the Jews - - even in the German states -- were neither court Jews nor financial advisors to princes, but rather small traders and shopkeepers.

'No poor Jews'

As Arendt would have it, there were no poor Jews living on the margins of European society, managing to live with difficulty and without political and civil rights. As Arendt would have it, "the Jews" were all bankers, financiers, court Jews and privileged, or in her generalizing language: "The Jews had been purveyors in wars and the servants of kings." Not some individual Jews, but "the Jews."

Moreover, Arendt seems to be unaware of a major fallacy in her account of the Jews' role in the rise of absolute monarchies and the modern nation-state: Several of these countries had few or no Jews living in them at the time of their emergence as modern nation-states.

France emerged as the major European absolutist monarchy under Louis XIV when hardly any Jews lived there. In England too, a modern state took shape toward the end of the 18th century in the wake of the industrial revolution, but very few Jews lived there at that time either. As for Spain, an absolutist state par excellence, the Jews had been expelled during the period when the Spanish absolute monarchy was being consolidated.

The ahistoricity so blatantly visible in these theories is accompanied by other generalizations that do not stand up to scrutiny. According to Arendt, "the Jews" always supported the governments in power in whichever country they were living, but the truth is that the number of Jews in the revolutionary, liberal and socialist movements was far greater than their

representation in the overall population. "The Jews," continues Arendt, were responsible for the hatred felt toward them because of their communal seclusion, their non-involvement in politics, their concern solely for themselves and their non-participation in social and class struggles.

The point is that one can argue precisely the opposite, that it was the disproportionate prominence of Jews in politics -- especially liberal and socialist politics -- that gave rise to anti-Semitic criticism. Examples range from Karl Marx and Eduard Bernstein in Germany to Ferdinand Lassalle in France; Jews were also heavily involved in the Communist revolutions in Bavaria and Hungary after World War I, and clearly in the Soviet revolution. Indeed, this was one of the classic anti-Semitic canards of the 19th century and of the Nazis in the 20th. But there is no mention of any of this in Arendt's analysis.

Equally astounding is the fact that in a nearly 200-page discussion of anti-Semitism in Germany, Arendt never mentions the writings of some of the chief anti-Semites: Wilhelm Marr, Eugen Dühring and Heinrich von Treitschke. (While not discussed in the text, Dühring is, however, mentioned in a footnote, though his Christian name is misspelled.) Nor is there any mention of the fact that the German student fraternities, the Burschenschaften, were a hotbed of anti-Jewish activity at the start of the 19th century, with the rise of German nationalism during the Napoleonic wars. As for the anti-Jewish statements by Johann Fichte, the major philosophical precursor of German nationalism -- not a word.

The absence of these works and developments from discussion is all the more surprising because these are figures whose books resonated greatly among the German public -- in fact, it was Marr who coined the term "anti-Semitism." Nor is there any mention of Richard Wagner's "The Jew in Music." Just as Arendt does not discuss the Jews themselves (apart from court Jews and bankers), so the anti-Semites do not really appear in her treatise. This is presumably due to the fact that had she mentioned them, it would emerge that the anti-Semitic criticism of the Jews was very different from what Arendt claims it to be: Anti-Semitic propaganda maintained, for example, that Jews, in their revolutionary activity, were undermining the existing political order or that they were "contaminating" the purity of the German culture or race. These aspects of anti-Semitic accusations against the Jews are absent from Arendt's account.

One of the problems with Arendt's historical analysis is that she bases her views not just on balanced, well-respected research, but also on the writings of Nazi historians such as Walter Frank, whom she cites often and without reservation. Frank, who headed the Reich Institute for the History of the New Germany, was responsible under Nazi rule for "cleansing" the German universities not only of Jewish lecturers but also of books written by Jews. Citing Frank, who committed suicide after the fall of the Third Reich, as a historical source regarding the role of the Jews in German history is problematic, to say the least.

Arendt also demonstrates a shallow historical understanding of Benjamin Disraeli. Rightly, she says there are racist elements in his novels and speeches, and it is appropriate to link him to thinkers like Arthur de Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Yet there is a difference: Gobineau and Chamberlain wanted to exalt the white race as supreme and justify European dominance of "inferior" races. But while Disraeli glorifies the oppressed and humiliated Jews and depicts the Europeans as intellectually inferior, this is protest racism by the humiliated, much like the black racism of Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X and James Baldwin. All racism is despicable, but there is room for distinctions.

'The oriental mob'

Bearing all this in mind, readers of "The Origins of Totalitarianism" will perhaps not be surprised by several strains of thought that appeared later in "Eichmann in Jerusalem." Nevertheless, they might be surprised by the way Arendt described the atmosphere at the Eichmann trial in a letter to German philosopher Karl Jaspers: "My first impression: On top, the judges, the best of German Jewry. Below them, the prosecuting attorneys, Galicians, but still Europeans. Everything is organized by a police force that gives me the creeps, speaks only Hebrew, and looks Arabic ... And outside the doors, the oriental mob, as if one were in Istanbul or some other half-Asiatic country."

Nevertheless, it would be wrong, even wicked, to see Arendt as a person tainted by Jewish self-hatred. She was a proud Jew and a courageous fighter against anti-Semitism and

totalitarianism, which is why she wrote this book. Yet as she herself would acknowledge, sometimes victims internalize the criticism aimed at them by their enemies. And indeed, though her book contains echoes of anti-Semitic stereotypes and accusations, Hannah Arendt is by no means a self-hating Jew. On the contrary, she comes across as a victim of anti-Semitism, in what is perhaps one of its cruelest, and most insidious, forms. There are tragic aspects to this monumental treatise, demonstrating just what anti-Semitism can sometimes do to the most brilliant of Jewish minds. This tragedy is painful and distressing -- and far from banal.

Prof. Shlomo Avineri's most recent book is "Herzl," published in Hebrew by Zalman Shazar Center Press.